

School culture

The space between the bars; the silence between the notes

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This article considers the issue of school culture within the context of international schools worldwide. Focusing on three main points – cultural differences, educating the human spirit, and the importance of relationships – a number of challenges are raised for the international educator and, especially, for the leaders of such schools.

KEYWORDS cultural differences, human spirit, international schools, leadership, relationships, school culture

Cet article explore le thème de la culture scolaire dans le contexte d'écoles internationales à travers le monde. En se concentrant sur trois points essentiels – les différences culturelles, l'éducation de l'esprit humain et l'importance des rapports humains – il soulève des défis pour les éducateurs internationaux, particulièrement pour les chefs de tels établissements scolaires.

En este artículo se analiza el tema de la cultura del colegio en el contexto de los colegios internacionales en distintas partes del mundo. Se concentra en tres puntos principales: diferencias culturales, la educación del espíritu humano y la importancia de las relaciones. A través de ellos, se plantea una serie de desafíos que deben enfrentar los educadores en los colegios internacionales y, en especial, quienes se encuentran al frente de este tipo de colegio.

International school context

I knew I wanted to be an international educator from my early years as an undergraduate student, and I have been blessed with a twenty-six year career spanning Germany; Greece; Tokyo and Kobe, Japan; Nepal; and, for the past seven years, Zimbabwe. While my life and views have clearly been influenced by the cultures and religions to which I have been exposed, it has been living and leading schools in the so-called Third World that has led to my interest in the topic of this article: that of school culture. I have come to realize that the greater the adversity surrounding the school, the more dire the need for – and the greater the opportunity to develop – a well-defined culture within the school. For it is the school's culture which provides the framework from which we and our students make sense of the life and world around us.

In the past I was not overly concerned with the ongoing debate over the meaning of international education. Lines such as Kevin Bartlett's (1992) 'International education is a myth struggling to become a reality' simply

were somehow not my reality. I took pride and solace in the fact that we had an impressive array of nationalities of staff and students who all got along better than the members of the United Nations, we were fortunate to have a supportive community of parents, and our students were happy and successful. Along came the local strife in Zimbabwe, 9/11 happened, the war in Iraq was launched, worldwide terrorism resurged affecting two of our African neighbors, and the world's view of my country, the USA, began to shift radically. I came to recognize that we are all, to some extent, operating in what Einstein called 'a kind of optical delusion of consciousness' (in Wilber, 2000). Our schools are benefactors of, and dependent upon, a global economy. Yet the movement toward globalization is now seen as dividing as much as it unites, for we have come to realize that while we have a global economy and telecommunications system, we do not have a global culture, we do not really have global governance or accountability, and we certainly do not have a coherent vision of a global future. And as we peer out from the protective walls of our 'gilded ghettos' in overseas communities around the world, we are confronted with the reality that many, many people do not share the global quest. These are the disenfranchised of this world – or those who empathize with their plight: people who are aware that one-quarter of the world is living in abject poverty, not to mention figures on inadequate medical care, sanitation, shelter or hunger. These are people who realize that almost half of humanity has no electricity and that 65 percent of our world's people have never even made a phone call. They see that what Europeans spend on ice cream or Americans spend on cosmetics in a given year would provide schooling and sanitation for the 2 billion people of this planet who do not have them (Sacks, 2002).

Where does this divide leave international schools, the supposed microcosms of the new world order? Where does this leave us? I would contend that we all sincerely believe in what we are doing: educating the so-called global citizens of tomorrow by promoting multiculturalism and at least the tolerance of difference. Yet, all we have to do is look at the leaders of international education to see that our schools themselves are culturally loaded: they are often founded with the assistance of Western governments for the purpose of educating the children of their employees (not to spread multiculturalism); they are largely headed by white educators from the first world who are trained in leadership theories which are culturally biased (when Nokia did a study of leadership, all 69 major theorists and authors were found to be American [Gerzon, 2003]); they are staffed largely out of necessity by native English speakers; they operate from western liberal humanist curricula often packaged as international; they are more often

than not accredited by western agencies which have no real concern with the issue of culture other than the superficial inclusion of the host culture in the curriculum; and they pride themselves on the 'third culture' of the school which is generally rarely more than a variation of the dominant (usually American or British) culture. There is a Zen saying that 'It's the space between the bars that holds the tiger. It's the silence between the notes that makes the music' (Dyer, 1995). I would contend that it is the way we deal with intercultural literacy which is our space between the bars and our silence between the notes. For effective cross-cultural engagement is dependent upon possessing the understandings and competencies, attitudes and identities which comprise intercultural literacy. And while intercultural literacy is at the very heart of our reason for being, it seems that this most important element is largely taken for granted in shaping the culture of our schools.

In further exploring this topic, three main points will be considered: the dignity of difference, educating the human spirit, and the importance of relationship, and thoughts will be offered which are aimed at improving the culture of our schools.

Dignity of difference

The first point involves more consciously addressing and teaching what the author Jonathan Sacks refers to as 'the dignity of difference' (Sacks, 2002). We are living in an extraordinary time, and, for the first time in history, all of the world's cultures – past and present – are available to us (Wilber, 2000). It has been argued that the so-called 'clash of civilizations' and rise in fundamentalist religions is emerging precisely because of the unprecedented accessibility of other cultures and a pervasive presence of difference (Sacks, 2002). Throughout history, people have consistently shielded themselves, segregated themselves, even fortified themselves, against difference. As Barbara Kingsolver (1995) writes:

We are . . . excruciatingly adept at many things . . . at recognizing insider/out-sider stature, for example, starting with white vs. black and grading straight into distinctions so fine as to baffle the bystander & ndash; Serb and Bosnian, Hutu and Tutsi, Crips and Bloods. We hold that children learn the discriminations from their parents, but they learn them fiercely and well, world without end . . . a preference for the scent of our own clan.

Our multi-cultural schools, however, are based on the premise of what is known as the 'contact hypothesis' – the notion that cross-cultural contact

automatically leads to positive inter-group attitudes (Heyward, 2000). The problem is that no one, in spite of trying, has been able to support this hypothesis by research. Some, such as Mark Heyward (2002), point out that intercultural literacy requires a so-called 'crisis of engagement' – an authentic cross-cultural experience – an experience which many argue our schools ironically work to shelter our students from having. It does beg the question as to whether our students are deriving their international perspective through happenstance or our concerted efforts. If we then consider the accepted premise that we interpret all other cultures through the frames of reference of our own culture, it is no wonder that most of us living internationally never truly live as an integral part of another culture, but rather spend our time living 'with' or, more often than not, 'next to' another culture.

And if we look at those of us teaching in and leading international schools, how many of us have, as part of a degree or otherwise, had any formal education in intercultural literacy? How many of us have learned this all-important foundation of our very business – cultural understanding – by osmosis and on-the-job-training rather than by design? How often has the topic of intercultural literacy been featured at any of our conferences? How many of our schools take the significant hurdle of cultural adjustment for students and their families, as well as for staff, simply for granted? And we continue this approach in an enterprise whose population is composed of short-termers and characterized by almost continual transit, further exacerbating the need for a clear and defined school culture.

I have watched hundreds of teachers come and go, some of whom had a 'knack' – an empathy – for other cultures and languages. But I have watched them as often as not approach their students as though they were seemingly plying their trade in London or New York or Adelaide, fully expecting those with whom they are working to learn and process and respond as they would if they were from the culture of the teacher. I have witnessed a Japanese student being told by a teacher to 'Look me in the eye when I speak to you' with no concept of how abhorrent that is in Japanese culture. I have seen teachers pursue the moral high ground from a Western perspective when a student did something wrong, rather than proceed so that all involved could save face, a cultural imperative in much of our world. I have observed teachers from individualistic cultures penalize students from collectivist cultures for cheating simply because they were doing their homework as a group. I have seen total frustration result when a West African student's polychromatic sense of time did not fit an American's monochromatic definition of time.

I wonder how many of us truly realize the depth of the struggle our students have in adopting the school's blended culture as their culture? Or how many of us know what it even feels like to be a Third Culture Kid (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999) and not be able easily to define where we are really from? How many of us ever stopped to wonder what it would be like to be a student who works hard to develop an international perspective while at the same time having parents who are hard-wired into their own mother culture . . . sometimes not even accepting the multicultural aspects of their child? Luckily for our schools we humans, despite our cultural differences, are at heart similar and we take great comfort in this reliance on our sameness: we all feel hunger and thirst, fear and pain, we all hope and aspire and dream. But if we look at the work of anthropologist Donald Brown, we would perhaps take less comfort in the traits common to all human cultures, among them: prestige and status; inequality of power and wealth; punishment; sexual modesty, regulations and jealousy; a male preference for young women as sexual partners; a division of labor by sex; hostility to other groups; and conflict within the group including violence, rape and murder (Pinker, 1997). But we are all also different, and it is teaching and ensuring attitudes of curiosity and respect for those differences that enables education to claim to hold the key to human dignity. Our role, then, must be to ensure our students are educated in an environment which bridges the lack of a universal language and causes them to transcend the limits and differences of individual cultures. As the new International Baccalaureate (IB) mission statement so aptly states, our goal must be to develop 'active, compassionate life-long learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right' (International Baccalaureate Organization 2005).

Another of my concerns under the heading of the dignity of difference is that we have become so politically correct, so homogenous, in our approach to the cultural diversity represented in our schools that we aim to no longer see difference. I had the rather illuminating experience of moving a white South African child, at her mother's request, from one section of an elementary class to another, only to have a backlash of parents charge me with running an apartheid-era type school. By moving the child, I had unwittingly created an essentially black class and a white class. At first, I took my 'color blindness' as positive; it was 'proof' to me that color did not matter, that I was somehow above the pervasive prejudice evident in Southern Africa. Some, however, viewed me not merely as culturally insensitive but as malicious. When I was ultimately threatened with a lawsuit over the placement of this erstwhile happy and unaware six year old, I was reminded of a line in one of John Abbot's books:

‘In order not to be accused of intolerance, people often refrain from being truly convinced of anything’ (Abbot and Ryan, 2000). And therein lies my concern: that by learning to edit our thoughts and our actions so carefully, we risk losing the truth. Every time we choose to celebrate a holiday, or not, or to present a holiday program, we run the risk of insulting someone whose song or celebration, however obscure, we might unintentionally omit; every time we perform a drama, we risk cultural offense. The result is a carefully crafted smörgasbord of celebrations and performances, equally balanced and metered out, designed so as to offend no one – and certainly not to favor anyone.

Are we also guilty of being politically correct by hiring only certain types of administrators and teachers despite our presumed embracing of difference? As I reflect on the body of administrators in international schools, I wonder why a more representative grouping of races and nationalities is not in evidence. Are others simply not interested in this line of work, or do they perhaps intuitively know they would stand a reduced chance of being hired in our ‘international’ communities? It seems to me that if we are truly leaders who aim to cast light, we need to stand up for and support all those whose dignity is their difference.

Educating the human spirit

Another element conspicuously missing from our largely secularized schools is that of educating the human spirit. In an effort to appease all and offend none, we have conveniently eliminated, both in schools in the United States and internationally, any hint of the spiritual. I am not speaking here about religion, as such, for I am the last person who would subscribe to the narrow-mindedness and hatred that is sweeping our world in the name of religion. I am speaking, however, about a conscious return to the Greek concept of *Kosmos* where the whole of existence was embraced and where the spiritual was seen as integral to both existence and learning. One of the indisputable commonalities of human beings is our ancient and abiding search for a grander purpose – the pursuit of a connection with something larger and hopefully more reliable than ourselves. If we hope to regain or instill a sense of humanity in the future, we have to develop our students’ ability to wonder, to be amazed at the very mystery of being, and to develop some relationship to that mystery.

I find it telling that very rarely do I see in any of the literature on international education reference to developing our students’ spiritual side. Yet in *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer (1998), there it is: ‘Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness . . . connections made not in their

methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in the ancient sense, as the place where the intellect and emotion and spirit converge in the human self’. I wonder how many of our teachers, working in environments of relentless change that essentially deny the human spirit, can themselves be spiritual or even reflective. Modern life, with its glorious technology, further distracts our young people from their very search to understand themselves and their relationship to that which is larger than they. As Thomas Moore (1992) writes, ‘Soul cannot thrive in a fast-paced life . . . taking things in and chewing on them requires time’. Our cultures are uncomfortable with silence or stillness and we, and our children’s parents, schedule our charges’ lives with constant and frenetic activity leading to what the author David Brooks (2001) refers to as ‘the most honed and supervised generation in history’. Unfortunately, there is also not much in Western educational tradition which encourages students to truly reflect on themselves. Yet youth should be a deeply spiritual time – a time of questioning and challenging and working through the very meaning of life.

Each year I take our seniors on a five-day sailing safari, the ostensible points of which are to learn to sail, to work as a team, and to experience the bush on foot. The real goals and outcomes of the trip are that we leave our music behind and become aware of the sound of the wind and the night-time roar of the lions, we witness the overwhelming beauty of Africa, and we grapple with the palpable reality that we are a very small part of a very magnificent scheme. We purposely talk about the very things these students seldom get to talk about: what their lives mean, who their heroes are, how they feel so far removed from civilization and so much closer to the quiet hum of the universe. What amazes me every year is how many students – good, solid kids – have not developed the capacity to see beyond themselves or even begin to ask the questions. How many have no heroes at all. How many have, as Margaret Meade (2000) observed, ‘lost their moorings . . . and are not initiated [at all] to the purpose and meaning of their own lives’.

I, as I know many others in my position do, proudly celebrate my so-called ‘Brady Bunch’ students, but I am ever-cognizant that, as Howard Gardner (1999) noted, they ‘can be intelligent without being moral; creative without being ethical; [and] sensitive to emotions without using that sensitivity in service to others’. It seems to me we should be doing more actively to teach compassion and respect and gratitude if we are going to combat prejudice and hatred and fear. For it is only through reaching their own inner peace that our little global citizens even have a chance of planting the seeds of world peace. As Einstein advised: ‘Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [of separateness] by widening our circle

of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty' (in Wilber, 2000). And we could start simply by developing mental focus and introspection, by teaching students to be calm and contemplative. Yet the closest I feel we usually get to this in school is telling students to sit down and be quiet! To borrow a thought from Wayne Dyer (1995):

Schools must become concerned and caring places, full of teachers who understand that teaching people to love themselves, to feel positive about their natural curiosity and in control of their own lives ought to be given at least as much attention as geometry and grammar and the rhyming scheme of an Elizabethan sonnet.

Importance of relationships

My final point in relation to developing an interculturally literate school culture is one that seems so obvious as not to warrant discussion, yet over the years I have been reminded again and again that the essential element in the educational process is its most tenuous: that of healthy human relationships. In our schools, relationships with staff compensate for the absence of our students' traditional support systems and serve as a cornerstone in defining our school culture. Through this web of relationships, our students are either challenged and nurtured or left unsupported and defeated in their efforts.

Let me be terribly honest for a moment: many students in international schools are on the whole pampered, sometimes downright spoiled, and quite often sheltered from the real world around them despite their often prolific travels. Students in many Third World settings suffer from what we musingly referred to in Nepal as the 'didi syndrome'. Didis were the household help who made sure we never cleaned a dish, made a bed, picked up our things from wherever we might have dropped them, or washed our own clothing. Our reliance on our 'domestics', as we refer to them in Zimbabwe, has profound effects on both adults and children as well as obvious and evident effects on school culture. In the eyes of our communities accustomed to such royal treatment, we, as professionals, all risk being viewed and treated as mere 'didis' and 'domestics' – dutifully cleaning up, often without anyone having to confront the lessons of our own or our child's own failings. I often wonder how many of our students return home from their lives overseas, contrary to the best intentions of our schools, having adopted attitudes of elitism, superiority and cultural chauvinism? How many have had racial stereotypes reinforced rather than reversed?

Robert Fulghum, in advising adults about children, warned: 'Don't worry that they never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you'. And therein lies the rub. Unfortunately I have not found, in my dealings with adults, the message inherent in the old adage 'Show a man how to fish and he'll fish for a lifetime' necessarily to ring true. In the places I have lived it seems that once a man has a fish, regardless of how he got it, he will ask for a lemon! As a matter of fact, without training otherwise, it is my experience that most adults will instinctually revert to the so-called goose theory of leadership: 'Honking and hissing like geese, people will cruise into the office, ruffle their feathers, poop on the rug, and leave. It then becomes the boss's job to clean up the mess' (Murphy, 1998). Not only does individual responsibility for one's own life and circumstances diminish in an atmosphere like this; I am convinced that collective responsibility erodes with the notion that someone else will clean up, someone else will fix it, someone else will make sure that I do not have to lift a finger. And if this is the prevailing school culture on the adult level, how does one even begin to promote among students an atmosphere which fosters interdependency or, more difficult still, universal responsibility?

Once again, the Greeks seemed to know about the basis of good teaching. They knew that it starts with modeling (*ethos*); that the quality of the relationship between the student and teacher (*pathos*) is essential to paving the way to the actual instruction (*logos*). I suggest that in modern day life, and in education, we have downplayed the importance of students' relationships with adults as role models of integrity and responsibility. As Walt Whitman so succinctly wrote, 'We convince by our presence'. And to date, none of us – no educator – has yet made the list of heroes as iterated by my senior students. Our students know what we also know in our hearts: that for our schools to truly fulfill our lofty missions, they must be based upon sincere, honest and mature relationships. Relationships that engender trust, support and forgiveness. Relationships that model the empathy and perspective necessary for intercultural and, therefore, international understanding.

The health of a school's culture is also dependent upon board members, administrators and staff all being interculturally literate and adhering to their prescribed roles. By doing so, they serve as positive and ethical models – leaders who cast light – to the adult community as well as to our students. We are striving at my school to create an oasis amid the adversity surrounding us by shaping a culture of cooperation and harmony, by aiming to have our very presence instill calmness and a sense of security, by being flexible and patient, by having a sense of humor, and by adopting a service orientation – and not just for IB Diploma CAS credit. We have

placed belonging and relationship at the head of the proverbial table, and worked hard not to lose sight of the fact that how effective we are as a school is, at the end of the day, judged not by our many successes but by how we handle that child who tests us the most.

The philosopher Rousseau first purported that a group of people will only consider changing their ways when they are confronted with a potentially devastating threat (in Walker, 2000). I am hoping that the leaders of international education will not simply perpetuate the status quo, for, as Einstein once again cautioned: 'The thinking that got us here is incapable of getting us out of here' (in Wilber, 2000). I am hopeful instead that we will more purposefully and consciously shape school culture – one of the most important factors as shown by research affecting student achievement (Barth, 2001) – and provide students with the competencies they are going to need to maneuver the complexities of their world. As Gray Mattern (1990) wrote some 15 years ago: 'We must become a truly discrete branch of the profession, committed to the concept and practice of global citizenship, and skilled in the art and science of transmitting them to those for whose education we are responsible'.

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